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AUTHOR Bate, Barbara A.
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ABSTRACT

Based on the assumptions that language use is selective and that language can affect an individual's perceptions in subtle ways, this paper investigates the use of the noun "man" and the pronouns "he" and "his" as generic terms. It is suggested that the use of "generic man" places women at a disadvantage in terms of understanding themselves and deciding their actions, and that alternatives should be sought to alleviate confusion and affirm human potential in all persons. Various individuals' opinions on these issues are presented and the paper concludes by stating that these problems need further research, as does the relationship between a person's self-perceptions and speech performance. (LL)

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GENERIC MAN, INVISIBLE WOMAN: LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Barbara A. Bate[1]
Department of Speech
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403

This paper has two concerns: to describe a problem and to suggest some ways to alleviate it. The problem centers on an aspect of English language behavior: the use of the words "man" or "men" to refer to all human beings, and the related use of the pronouns "he," "his," or "him" to refer to a single person of unspecified gender. How does a person hear a word like "man" in its "generic" usage, and what is the process of interpreting and responding when others use such terms? How do the experiences of females and males differ in this situation?

Reflecting on the problem of interpreting and reacting to "generic man" leads to two essential claims. One, ambiguities and inconsistencies in uses of the term "man" place women at a disadvantage for understanding themselves as persons and for determining their actions in current social circumstances. Two, if current language practices produce particular difficulties by rendering women "invisible," it is appropriate to seek alternatives within the existing language which might alleviate confusion and encourage the full development of all persons.

Conceptual Foundations. Before proceeding to investigate these two claims directly, it is useful to outline some relevant theoretical perspectives about relationships between language, thought, and social behavior. Several writers have asserted that language patterns are intertwined with modes of thinking. Whorf (1956) used anthropological evidence to argue that important connections exist between the logic of a language and the perceptions and thoughts of persons using that language. From a background of rhetoric and literature Burke (1966) derived the concept of language as "symbolic action." Like Whorf he asserts that much of what people regard as "reality" is built up as they engage in processes of symbol-making and symbol-using. Johnson (1946) and Bois (1973), who are part of a group called the General Semanticists, view persons as "semantic reactors" who respond to experience by continually generalizing or abstracting from their direct observations. All these writers share the conviction that language use is selective, that any term used directs attention toward some things and away from others, and that language can affect persons' perceptions in ways of which they are not aware.

In addition to these language theorists, a number of psychologists and sociologists have examined language as a link between individual psychology and social processes. Kelly (1955) developed the theory that individuals organize experience into Personal Constructs in order to predict future events in their lives. Ellis and Harper (1961) developed Rational Emotive Therapy based on examining the sentences people say to themselves. And Mischel (1973) incorporated

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personal language processing in his cognitive social learning theory of personality. Mischel's theory is important in connecting actual situations with individual ways of understanding and reacting to situations, and in showing that responses are largely dependent on prior experience. Berger and Luckmann (1966) also stress from a sociological viewpoint the link between language and social experience. They state that the language used in everyday life reinforces a "social construction of reality" and in this way affects individuals' beliefs about their identities and their limits.

In light of the theories mentioned, this paper begins with the assumption that language, thinking, and social experience are interrelated. If these interrelationships exist, then it can be useful to examine ways that females and males might experience one aspect of language differently according to gender. The first claim to be examined is that experiencing the use of "generic man" places women at a disadvantage for understanding themselves and deciding their actions. Only females can become "linguistically invisible" when the term "man" is used; only women have the task of making sense of the fact that they are both "man" and "not man" at the same time. Greater awareness is needed of the problems "generic man" language poses for the experiencing person. After exploring some of these problems, the second claim--that language alternatives should be used--will be addressed.

Three Problems with "Man." The difficulties involved in "generic man" language can begin to be recognized with the help of three general principles about language. First, words differ in their degree of abstract or concrete reference; "animal" can refer to a larger category of objects than "anteater." Second, meanings of words largely depend on the contexts in which they are used. Third, the contexts and meanings of words change over time, though language rules and practices may not reflect the changes. Each of these principles bears on current uses of "generic man." They can be illustrated by three sentences including the term "man" or "men":

1. Socrates is a man.
2. All men are created equal.
3. Caution: Men at Work.

Each of these examples conveys some of the ambiguities and contradictions involved when females in particular try to interpret and respond to "generic man" language and those who use it. The first example raises a linguistic question, the second adds a cognitive question, and the third adds a question of social behavior.

The Linguistic Dimension. Example 1, "Socrates is a man," is the minor premise in a well-known classical syllogism: "All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates is mortal." For anyone not familiar with the rest of the syllogism, there would be no way to know from the sentence alone whether the topic is Socrates' maleness or his humanness. The term "man" can exist on two levels of abstractness at the same time, the gender-specific and the generic. In this case the context provides a fairly straightforward linguistic interpretation: since females and males share the characteristic of being mortal, it would seem logical to substitute "person" for "man" in the

sentence, so that it would read, "Socrates is a person." But the original sentence, by itself, is likely to be experienced as gender-specific first. For a male this is not a problem; he can identify with Socrates as male and as human being. A female, in contrast, has to translate or transform the sentence (Chomsky, 1968) in order to identify herself with a "generic man."[2]

The Cognitive Dimension. Example 2, "All men are created equal," presents another interpreting task for the person responding to language. Again the question of level of abstractness arises, and here the historical setting adds further complications. This quotation from the Declaration of Independence has been applied in elementary school classes as if it referred to "men" generically. But this usage is in conflict with the historical origins of the sentence. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration, opposed extending the vote to either females or blacks, and he expressed the preference that women be "gentle, feminine, yielding," and nonpolitical. Knowledge of this aspect of American history would indicate that Jefferson's statement should be translated, "All white male property owners are equal." The term "men" appears to have been for Jefferson not only gender-specific, but race- and class-specific as well (Brodie, 1974).

Once a person, female or male, understood the historical context of "all men are created equal," it would not be difficult to become more skeptical about other instances of "generic man." Perhaps current speakers and writers are also unaware of women when they use the words "man" or "men." Stanley (1975) recently described the problem of unconsciously excluding women as a product of the historical predominance of males in public roles. Women were in fact invisible in most social settings, so their invisibility in language reflected a reality. But as Stanley and others have noted, the tendency to equate "human" and "male" remains so pervasive in current usage that many communicators fail to notice when two-year-olds are called "manly" or when individuals are linked with "wives."[3] But those who do notice the jump from generic to gender-specific may have little patience with that practice, particularly if it reflects on their own opportunities for action.

The Dimension of Social Behavior. How to act in changing social circumstances is the focus of the third example, "Caution: Men at Work." Until recently, the reference for the term "men" in this example did not need to be questioned, since construction or repair crews were typically composed of all males. But now that social and occupational patterns are shifting, both women and men workers frequently find themselves in situations of conflict between language customs and present conditions. For the woman worker operating in a new environment, the sign itself represents a conflict between her physical presence and her linguistic absence. Even more troublesome is the conflict likely to occur in her interpersonal relationships with her coworkers if she chooses to point out that the sign "Caution: Men at Work" makes her feel invisible. How should she respond to the felt contradictions in this situation?

Whatever response a woman chooses to make to the sign and to her coworkers, she faces questions of deviance from tradition. Treating

the term "men" as generic rather than gender-specific would ask that she ignore the history of the term in context. Raising the question of the sign's accuracy would mean deviating from social expectations, both by working on the crew and by "making trouble" concerning her presence. Changing roles can bring a more intense awareness of the ambiguities and inconsistencies in language customs, and this awareness may be costly to the experiencing person. In such circumstances neither deviance nor remaining invisible is an attractive option (Janeway, 1971; Tresemer, 1974).

Language Development and Identity:Becoming Invisible. Dilemmas about how to view oneself and how to behave can be traced in part to the early experiences children have with language. Children learn about categories of objects by naming them and hearing them named (Brown, 1958), and they move from concrete to more abstract uses of language as their thinking develops in the early years (Piaget, 1926). Female children differ from their male counterparts in experiencing these processes of naming and abstracting, in ways significantly related to the "generic man" usage.

A female child has a more complex task of interpretation when the word "man" in a generic sense comes into her world. Young children will probably hear the words "man" and "woman" numerous times in the preschool years. In their first experiences, the words will be used in concrete or gender-specific ways; children could translate the terms as "daddy" and "mommy." When the second meaning for "man" is introduced, as an inclusive term for all human beings, the female will face a new task of translation. Her identity has its own distinctive labels in "girl" and "woman," but it is now somehow submerged within a label that also identifies persons of the other gender. One meaning of "man" supposedly includes her; the other does not.[4] In developing a sex role identity, it could be important for her to be able to differentiate between the two uses of "man." Yet such differentiations might be hard to make in actual situations.

Confronted with a particular instance in which "generic man" is used, a female might ask herself some of the following questions:

- What does this term refer to?
- Is the speaker or writer thinking of females as well as males?
- Am I seen as part of the audience, of those being addressed?
- How can I tell? What are the cues?
- If I'm not included (that is, if all those addressed or treated as central characters are males), what should I conclude about myself, or about what is happening?
- What does all this mean for how I should act?

It need not be assumed that all females ask these questions explicitly as they listen or read. The point is that such questions of identification can arise in communication situations (LaRossa, 1974; Arnold, 1974) and that females in particular may find them hard to answer. The times when answers are likely to be most clear are those times when the reference is most concrete, when context suggests that "man" means male. At such times, a woman of any age can begin to feel invisible.

The Fading of the Female Image. Besides the "generic man" usage, other aspects of the learning environment contribute to the problem of women's invisibility. Larger numbers of male characters are found in picturebooks for preschool children (Weitzman, 1972); elementary school textbooks and readers show predominantly male characters, proper names, and pronouns (Graham, 1973; Franzwa, 1975). Women are portrayed in fewer settings and in fewer activities than are males in these materials. These quantitative differences can have an impact on personal experience, since sheer exposure to the presence of a word or an image can reinforce and solidify that word or image in memory. The male image becomes increasingly clear, forceful, and appealing; the female image meanwhile blurs, shifts, and takes on negative connotations.

The image of woman as an entity may shift or disappear within a single interaction as well as over longer periods of time. This process can be seen as a kind of "trap door phenomenon" when a female is referred to in her own presence as if she were not present at all. An example from the writer's experience will illustrate the point. At a community auction, the auctioneer described the mixed condition of the used household goods he was selling, with these words: "I'll try to tell you when there's something wrong with a piece of merchandise, but you buy it as is. Just like you got your wife--for better or worse." A disconcerting shift occurred between the first and second sentences: in the first sentence the women were supposedly being addressed as members of the audience (of which they made up approximately half); in the second, they were no longer receivers of the communication, but objects of discussion. The women had become invisible to the auctioneer. Or perhaps they had never been visible to him as active persons; how could they know?

The auctioneer's comments invoke a stereotype of marriage as an economic arrangement with the wife as a kind of commodity. Other aspects of language usage carry connotations that women are something other than independent, purposeful, and valued human entities. Novels and literary criticism show women in many cases as formless, passive, compliant, and confined (Ellmann, 1968). Mental health practitioners similarly may see the "healthy adult female" as more emotional and submissive, less objective and adventurous, than either the "healthy adult male" or the "healthy adult," sex unspecified. The study reporting these latter findings (Broverman et al., 1970) is of particular interest because it shows the closeness of psychologists' perceptions of "adult" and "male." Females are either invisible, different, or something not quite human. None of these characterizations would encourage a woman to think clearly and positively about herself as a person.

Language Impact and Response Patterns. How will a particular woman be affected by her language experiences? The answer depends on both individual and environmental factors. An individual's responses to the phenomena described here will be partly a function of such things as age, environmental setting, and personal predispositions for processing information (Mischel, 1973). Another influence may be a gender-specific ability difference. Females excel males in verbal learning tasks in the first three years of life, and again after the

age of eleven (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). With a slightly greater facility for verbal tasks, females might also have a greater awareness of ambiguities or contradictions in the verbal cues they hear or read. All persons monitor their environment for cues to guide their behavior; and the "generic man" cue carries more ambiguity and potential inconsistency for the female than for the male. A female's speech and action might well be affected by the way she experiences the ambiguity and inconsistency of "generic man" language.[6]

Various theories have been developed to explain the ways people deal with inconsistencies in their experience (McGuire, 1967). All of these "cognitive consistency theories" share the notion that people want in some sense to integrate their experiences, to make their thoughts and actions fit together. If a motive toward consistency does exist, then women are likely to experience "generic man" language with greater frustration than at earlier periods in history. With women more visible in some areas of society, and with widespread discussion of their abilities and opportunities, the gap is now wide between public policies and language practices. Women involved in issues related to gender may be acutely aware of this gap in their daily lives; several possibilities exist for how they might respond.

Three major patterns of response could reduce an experienced sense of contradiction between being "generic man" and "invisible woman." First, a woman might adopt an Adjusted approach to herself and to "generic man" uses. In this pattern she could reach consistency by acknowledging that she is a woman, accepting the connotations of woman as inferior and peripheral, and denying such motives as ambition or adventurousness which fail to fit the category "woman." Consistency between experience and beliefs can come in this instance at the cost of a positive self-concept (Bernard, 1971; Janeway, 1971). The second approach involves a Queen Bee pattern of action and belief. A woman who has succeeded in "a man's world" might look on women in general as inferior, but she might consider herself an exception to the rule. Thinking "like a man" would be a compliment to her (Staines et al., 1974). The third major response pattern can be called the Feminist approach. In this case, a woman might maintain her membership in the category "woman," but question the terms or traits that have been assigned to that category. Prizing her existence as a woman, she would be likely to argue that language users unfairly discriminate against women when they claim that "generic man" is a neutral or harmless term (Daly, 1973; Murray, 1972; Stanley, 1975).

Both Queen Bee and Feminist responses can be costly in terms of relationships: the Queen Bee loses her sisterhood with other women, and the Feminist faces dispute with men who deny the validity of her argument on language even when they agree that social discrimination has occurred. What options are open to Feminists in such a dispute?

Language Alternatives I: Reversal. One way to make clearer the assumptions in one's own language is to go outside that language (Whorf, 1956, p. 244). If traditional language is in fact "male language," then women who want to point out this bias can help to dramatize the power of "generic man" by reversing it to "generic woman." This format is used in an exercise entitled "Woman--Which

Includes Man, Of Course" (Wells, 1973). The excerpt here illustrates both the interdependence of language and social patterns, and the power of simple repetition as a device for heightening an image.

> Consider reversing the generic term Man. Think of the future of Woman, which, of course, includes both women and men. Feel into that, sense its meaning to you - as a woman - as a man.
>
> Think of it always being that way, every day of your life. Feel the everpresence of woman and feel the non-presence of man. Absorb what it tells you about the importance and value of being woman - of being man.
>
> Recall that everything you have ever read all your life uses only female pronouns - she, her - meaning both girls and boys, both women and men. Recall that most of the voices on radio and most of the faces on TV are women's - when important events are covered - on commercials - and on the late talk shows. Recall that you have no male senator representing you in Washington.
>
> Feel into the fact that women are the leaders, the power-centers, the prime-movers. Man, whose natural role is husband and father, fulfills himself through nurturing children and making the home a refuge for woman. This is only natural to balance the biological role of woman who devotes her entire body to the race during pregnancy - the most revered power known to Woman - and man, of course.
>
> Consider the obvious biological explanation for woman as the ideal - her genital construction. By design, the female genitals are compact and internal, protected by her body. Male genitals are so exposed and vulnerable that he must be protected from outside attack to assure the perpetuation of the race. He obviously needs sheltering.
>
> (Wells, 1973, pp. 126-127)

The exercise evokes an imaginary world in which current imbalances of language and social practice are reversed. Women are visible, men invisible, except as men support and relate to women. By a linguistic shock tactic, the exercise increases awareness of some assumptions about male and female roles, assumptions that language both reflects and reinforces. Its impact on readers and hearers is frequently powerful, suggesting the depth of influence language patterns can have on perceptions.

The "generic woman" exercise supports in part the second claim of this paper: that if current language use produces particular problems for women, alternatives should be sought to alleviate confusion and affirm human potential in all persons. "Generic woman" offers a whimsical alternative, but not a practical solution. It stereotypes men in ways women have found offensive when applied to them, and it simply shifts the invisibility to men rather than ending it for both genders. Other proposed solutions, such as "genkind" for mankind or "te" for he or she (Miller and Swift, 1972; Farrell, 1975), have been offered during the past several years. These options also have some

disadvantages: they are not widely known, they are easily mispronounced, and they are open to ridicule. It is possible that one or more of the coined terms may gain widespread acceptance, as in the case of the term "Ms." But in the absence of consensus on "te" or "gen," it makes sense to look in the existing language for other less radical alternatives.

Language Alternatives II: Visibility for All. Ideally, a use of language should meet three criteria: it should be as clear as possible, as constructive as possible, and as convenient as possible to employ. Applying these criteria to "generic man" alternatives, the best terms are those which are concrete and lacking in competing connotations; words which affirm human possibilities that go beyond traditional sex roles; and words which can be spoken or written with as little difficulty as possible. The McGraw-Hill Book Company has prepared a comprehensive list of suggestions for meeting these goals, and among the most important are these:

Instead of	Use
man, mankind	humanity, people, human beings, men and women
manpower or manhours	human energy, workers, work-hours, person hours
mailman	letter carrier
"The doctor usually brings his wife."	"Doctors typically bring spouses/husbands or wives/ living partners."
"Each student can pick up his book today."	"Students can pick up their books today." or "Each student can pick up his or her book today."
"he" as unspecified person	he or she, she or he

In addition to the alternatives listed for "he," it may be helpful to consider dropping the prohibition against "they," as in "Everyone went where they wanted," since it meets the three criteria better than the supposedly standard term "he."

All of the suggested options are either gender-neutral or gender-specific; that is, they either imply or make explicit that women as well as men are included in the reference. Both of these approaches are preferable to the use of "generic man." But gender-specific terms such as "men and women" bring the added benefit of making females pointedly visible along with men, so that their present and potential contributions are less likely to fade from awareness (Stanley, 1975). Acknowledgment of persons as entities is a most basic kind of affirmation.

Options clearly exist for more affirmative ways of speaking and writing. But those who speak and write need to believe that changes in longstanding habits are worth the trouble to make. Lakoff is one linguist who disagrees that "generic man" and "he"-pronouns should be altered; in her view, "it is realistic to hope to change only those

linguistic uses of which speakers themselves can be made aware, as they use them" (Lakoff, 1973, p. 75). Lakoff believes that the uses of "he" and "man" as generic terms are less open to change, and less in need of changing, than other imbalances in language practice. Her descriptions of these other language customs are comprehensive and incisive. But her claim is not persuasive that "generic man" usage is at the same time too unconscious to change and not serious enough to warrant change. This claim leaves out of account two essential points. First, in this writer's experience both men and women have changed their speaking and writing habits after becoming aware that "generic man" in context typically excludes women. Second, a fundamental assumption of this paper is that language choices both reflect social arrangements and affect ways of thinking and acting. Because it is pervasive in daily language use, "generic man" experience can have a damaging effect on the self-perceptions and aspirations of women in this society. The attitudes and actions of women, as well as those displayed toward women, are less likely to change in positive directions if the language of daily life continues to treat women as invisible.

Two kinds of argument can be made for changing the "generic man" custom. The argument based on historical precedent would be that the term "man" is no longer an accurate reflection of social conditions. The argument based on human potential would be that whatever positions women currently hold in society, language patterns should be sought which facilitate human growth. The first argument is easier to defend, but it is not in itself sufficient. Empirical situations have not changed to the point that women are in fact visible in all segments of social life, though public commitments have been made to equal opportunity for women and men. One way to honor those commitments is to use the tool of language to free ourselves and each other from inaccurate and limiting self-images. We can affect our own worlds of experience by the language we choose. In the struggle for human liberation, it is important to choose our words, and our worlds, with care.

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[2]The phrase "a generic man" highlights the difficulty a person might have in imagining a single person apart from gender. It should be noted that this discussion does not deal with "man" at the most abstract level, as in "the study of Man." Such a phrase may appear free of ambiguity; but this usage rarely occurs in isolation from other forms of "man" or the male pronoun, and the focus here is on language as experienced in the context of daily life.

[3]The notion that language carries a pervasive and often unconscious male perspective (Murray, 1972; Stanley, 1975) is supported by some recent exploratory research by Borden (1974). Given the thou-

sand most frequently used English words, a group of college students experienced words such as "student," "individual," and "it" as more masculine than neutral or feminine. Both males and females reported many more words in the list to have masculine rather than feminine connotations for them.

[4]This experiential order, going from the gender-specific to the generic meaning of "man," is paralleled in the 1973 edition of the American Heritage Dictionary. The first two meaning given for "man" are these: 1) "an adult male human being, as distinguished from a female," and 2) "any human being regardless of sex or age."

[5]Numerous examples of imbalances in the images of males and females in language have been recounted; see for example, Sayers, 1947; Strainchamps, 1971; Farwell, 1973; Lakoff, 1973; Stanley, 1975. One instance of differing connotations for parallel terms is the pair "master / mistress." Consider how incongruous it would be to reverse the genders associated with the two words.

[6]Gender differences in speech behavior have received attention from several perspectives. Shuy (1969) describes differences in grammar and phonology, particularly among minority populations. Sachs et al. (1972) have found that the voice qualities of male and female children differ more than would be explainable by differences in anatomy. And Lakoff notes that women perform differently in the use of color terms, tag questions, and various "polite" constructions. Kramer, however, has questioned the extent of actual, as distinct from perceived, gender differences in language performances. This question needs further research; so does the relationship between a person's self-perceptions and speech performance.

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